The Forest King

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/28415499.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Beverly Katz, Franklyn Froideveaux, Tobias Budge, Abigail Hobbs, Bedelia Du Maurier, Alana Bloom, Mrs. Komeda (Hannibal), Brian Zeller
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Fantasy, Fae & Fairies, Murder, Cannibalism, Wendigo, Ravenstag, Explicit Sexual Content, Minor Character Death, Mystery, Love at First Sight, sexy magic, Friends to Lovers to Enemies, and lovers again because I can't really do angst, Manipulation, A Midwinter Fever Dream, it's a little cracky
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2020-12-30 Completed: 2021-02-10 Words: 19,160 Chapters: 6/6

The Forest King

by pikakelei

Summary

King Hannibal has started expanding his domain into the forest ruled by Will, the Forest King. Will intends to confront him about it, but things don’t always go as planned.

A fairytale AU.

Notes

Inspired by @beatricenius’s art

This sat in my head for six months, fully formed, so now it can sit in yours! I'm new at this, so hopefully it's not too terrible.

You'll find a blend of different mythologies here, which is to say please forgive any weirdness (and liberties taken) as I muck about in this magic sandbox.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will gazed across the partly frozen lake and sighed, his breath puffing out white and warm. It was a clear winter day with the sun high in a thin blue sky, making the snow gleam yet providing little warmth. The solstice was three weeks away, which meant rest for most creatures including Will, but that was before the human king in the north began building within an acre of the forest edge.

Will heard the sprites whispering through the pines and even the naiads of the lake, normally hibernating by now, were seen surfacing in the unfrozen parts of the lake to peer curiously at the men carrying pallets of stone and wood and grain.

It surprised Will to see the men so industrious even in winter, their clustered encampments constantly active and their stoves putting out grey smoke from daybreak to dusk. Will himself had felt his body slow down with the darkening of the season. He was tired early and often, which did little for his temperament, and which Beverly, a particularly blunt wood nymph, did not fail to remark upon.

“Why do you think he needs so many trees?” she asked on a soggy afternoon. Will noticed her dark look in the direction of the forest that once contained a dense crowd of conifers but had been thinned out significantly.

His forehead creased in thought. “I think for paper. Spruce is softer than oak, or birch.”

“Well, just as long as his highness doesn’t suddenly decide he prefers oak.”

“Your oak trees will be safe, I promise.”

“Uh huh. That’s what you told the gnomes before he flattened their knolls.” Beverly smirked at Will’s frown. “I don’t think they liked your suggestion to rebuild them further west to ‘get more sun’.”

“They’re just annoyed I ended up being right.”

“Yeah, that must be it.” She shivered as a bitter, wet wind came up off the lake and cut through the empty trees to where they stood. The ground was packed with dead leaves and old, slushy snow that squelched under their feet. “The days are already so short. It feels like another long one this year.”

“You say that every year.” Will tilted his head up to the branches overhead that broke the overcast sky behind them into jagged patterns. “There’s another storm coming. You should make sure your family is warm enough.”

Beverly waved her hand. “We’ll be fine, Will, stop worrying. The oak forest is twice as large this winter, and the burrows aren’t as dark and depressing since you got us those lanterns.” She grinned at him. “Or should I say stole.”

“Traded. They won’t notice a few missing.” He had actually taken more than a few when the workmen were distracted but hoped the bags of apples and cask of honey wine had made up for the pilfering.

Beverly’s wide smile waned as she looked more closely at him. “What about you, Will? You seem more tired than ever these days.”

“I’m fine,” Will said. Beverly did not look convinced. He shrugged, turning away from her prying. “It’s probably just the weather.”

Truthfully, Will felt uneasy for many reasons, the weather included. This was the first time in recent memory that Will had really considered the human world, as close as it was. He vaguely knew about King Robertas, who ruled quietly for almost twenty years before leaving his nephew to take his place, not more than a year ago.

Will knew little about the new king and was content for it to remain that way if not for his current annoying and persistent interest in Will’s woods and land.

Ordinarily, the encroachment into the forest would’ve been solved easily by an enchantment. It worked in previous years to keep wandering villagers away from the forest’s border, and protected the forest folk as much as the humans, who were likely to be led astray, or eaten, by a wicked sprite. Will’s magic was consistent, and the creatures of the forest depended on its strength. Only it had felt oddly weaker in the past few months and was harder to draw up, like a stubborn root stuck deep in the earth.

At first, he did blame the weather: the too wet spring, the scorching summer, and the autumn that barely hung around before an unexpected snowstorm announced the early arrival of winter. Then, Will blamed the men who came to tear down the trees and raze the hills. With every weed pulled up, Will felt as though a hand was reaching inside him and rearranging his insides.

He had been bewildered to learn the squirrels were eating through the dryad reserves, not to mention the ongoing squabbles between the goblins and trolls, who generally got along but lately seemed to disagree about everything. It was as though the entire forest was affected by the humans, which was impossible. Cutting down a few trees shouldn’t have made a difference.

Will’s worries lingered with him until the start of the next winter storm. Heavy, dark clouds obscured the sky, and the air was filled with impending moisture. It was late afternoon when the first big, fluffy flakes began to fall and the wind picked up, swirling white through the evergreens. As twilight turned to night, the storm had become blizzard.

It was because of the storm that Will didn’t recognize someone shouting at first. It was senseless for anyone to be outside, so it took him several moments to realize it was a voice crying out above the howling wind. It came from the far west side of the woods where the

human-made road wove through connecting the southern village to the castle lands in the north. Will was there in a literal blink of an eye and stopped at what he found before him.

A carriage had been overturned, caught in a snowbank. The driver had been flung off and was several feet away face down in the snow. Will did not see anyone else or any of the carriage horses. He heard a muffled groan from within and hurriedly went to the door facing upwards, rapidly becoming covered by plummeting snow. He climbed up the carriage body, found the latch and lifted it open, peering into the depths. A pale, angular face turned up at him in the darkness.

“Randall?” The man’s voice sounded slightly uncertain. “I will need help getting out.”

“Not Randall, but here, take my hand,” Will said, reaching inside the carriage until he felt the man’s outstretched fingers. Will hoisted him up and out, gripping the door’s frame for support.

Dropping into the snow, the man stumbled to the side and into the underside of the carriage as he tried to stand. He leaned for a moment, his fingers touching his temple.

“What is it?” Will asked.

“I think I may have hit my head,” the man said. His voice was deep and accented.

“Do you want to sit down?” Will looked around dumbly for a moment, unable to see anything, before conjuring a blue flame in his palm to survey their surroundings. The flame encased them in a perfect circle of light and he recognized where they were.

He turned back towards the man, who was staring at him. His face was illuminated by the blue glow of Will’s light and he looked alarmed; his eyes were fixed on the flame in Will’s hand.

“It’s all right. Don’t be afraid,” Will said.

“I’m not afraid.”

Will brought the light higher so they could see each other more clearly. The man looked wary but curious. “Who did I hear shouting? Was it your driver? Randall?” Will glanced over at the figure still unmoving in the snowdrift.

“I believe so. I was knocked unconscious when we overturned, but I remember a voice.”

Will moved towards the driver and bent down to feel his neck for a pulse. He was dead. Will stood and turned back to the man still leaning against the carriage. “What were you doing out here?” Will asked, frowning, “Did you come up from the village?”

The man’s eyes were still focused on the light in Will’s hand. His gaze flicked up to Will’s face, his dark eyes assessing. “Are you also doing that to the snow? So it does not touch us?” He raised his arm to show his sleeve was dry, the flakes not sticking to it.

Will blinked. “Yes,” he said, “But we can’t stay out here all night.”

“Do you live in this forest?” The man was remarkably alert for someone likely concussed.

“Can you walk? I know somewhere we’ll be safe from the storm.” Will looked at the man’s clothes and noted the lack of outerwear. “The temperature will keep dropping.”

“I can walk.” The man shuffled forward rather unevenly; the snow came up to his knees.

Will gripped the man’s forearm to steady him as he came closer and held tight to the stranger as he stared hard into the shadowy forest surrounding them, whistling once, low and clear. The sound was muffled by the snow, but he hoped it would carry.

A dark shape moved between the trees, snuffling like a great beast and barely visible beyond the arc of Will’s blue light and falling snow. There was a rustling of feathers and all at once a stag erupted from trees, kicking up thick clumps of snow and stopping before Will and the man.

“That is,” the man said, quiet wonder in his voice, “A feathered stag.”

“It’s easiest if you grab his antlers when getting on.” The stag knelt in the snow so it was low enough to climb onto its back and Will helped the man on, maneuvering his own body behind him. There was enough room for both men to sit comfortably.

“You know, it’s been a while since I’ve done this,” Will said. “Usually I can walk to any part of the forest in an instant, but I can’t do that with another person tagging along. He should remember where to go. Just don’t pull out any of his feathers.” Will patted the stag’s warm, feathery flank. “I’m Will, by the way.”

The man turned and Will could just make out a smile. “Hannibal.”

***

Hannibal looked around Will’s dwelling carefully. Situated underneath an enormous oak tree lay a cavernous space made up of several rooms filled with all sorts of things; mostly books, but also an old harpsichord, dried herbs and fish hanging on lines, jarred fruits and vegetables, tools and metal instruments, bottles of golden wine, handmade fishing equipment, and most peculiarly, a bed in the middle of the sitting room.

Will was crouched before an immense fireplace and heating a portion of the amber wine in a small pot. He poured out two mugs and gave one to Hannibal.

“This is from this year’s crop,” Will said, taking a sip of the steaming beverage. Hannibal did the same, watching Will.

“I taste honey, naturally, and orange, clove, cinnamon and,” Hannibal mused, “dried grapes.”

Will raised his brows. “Most people miss the raisins.”

“Is this your recipe?”

“Tried and true. There’s usually more, but the bees were slow this year.”

Hannibal took another sip, his chilled limbs defrosting. “Do they normally produce more honey?”

Will shrugged. “This summer was strange. Nothing seemed to grow right. The bees usually go for the sunflowers on the castle grounds to the north but they grew in peaky.”

Hannibal hummed. “That is unfortunate.” He came to sit in the chair opposite Will before the fire.

"Are you hungry? I have oatcakes."

"Will I be allowed to leave once I have eaten them?"

Will’s brow furrowed.

"*'Never eat the food of the fairies'*, I believe the saying goes." Hannibal's eyes danced with humor.

"Well, you've already had my mead," Will said with a laugh. "And I'm not a fairy."

"No? Just an ordinary man who holds fire in his hands and lives beneath a tree?"

"Something like that," Will mumbled into his wine.

"Do you live alone, Will?"

"Are you asking if there are others like me?”

“Are there?”

Will gestured above him. “Just the other folk, you know." Hannibal shook his head.

"The other creatures. The wildlife, the sprites." Will paused. "That's why I was so surprised to see your carriage. It's one thing to be traveling in a snowstorm, but no one is usually dumb enough to take the forest road at night. Sorry."

Hannibal only seemed intrigued. "Truthfully, I did not think the storm would be so bad. I was in the village for an urgent matter. One of the villagers had been badly injured."

“Are you a doctor?” Will asked.

“Something like that.” Hannibal gave him a small smile, one that barely moved his lips but creased the skin around his eyes. From this distance Will could see the lines that framed them, and the firelight brought out the blond in his strange silver hair.

Will pressed his lips together, frowning. "You said you were on your way from the village. Were you going to the castle?"

"Yes. I live there."

"Why were you traveling alone?"

"I was not entirely alone. I had my driver." Hannibal watched as a log fell in the fire. "I hope we will be able to find his body in the morning. I would like to return him to his family."

"I doubt anything will come for him. It's too damn cold.” Will considered, "Although I can't promise that. I get the feeling that what happened to your carriage wasn't by accident. It's a good thing I found you when I did."

"Indeed it is." Hannibal had turned from the fire and was studying Will, who avoided his eyes.

"It's late. You must be tired." Will stood and reached a hand out to take Hannibal's mug. Hannibal was surprised to find he had already finished his wine. "You can have the bed." Will placed the mugs on the mantle and motioned towards the single cot in the room. "I'll take the chairs here."

"I wouldn’t mind remaining where I am. It’s a comfortable chair."

"I'd mind if you didn't take the bed. Please," Will added.

Hannibal bowed his head and made his way to the small bed, easing off his boots and untucking his shirt from his trousers. He heard Will moving things about behind him. Once settled in the small bed comfortably, he turned and saw that Will had arranged the chairs together and covered himself with a blanket, his body angled to the fireplace and away from Hannibal.

Hannibal studied his form, thinking he would find it challenging to find asleep after such an eventful evening, but Will’s mead had settled in his belly, warming him completely, and the curve of Will’s silhouette against the fire was the last thing he remembered.

He walks in a snow covered clearing, his pace slowed by his armour and the sword at his hip. The light is murky and the crunch of his footsteps oddly dampened by a strange thickness in the air, like the humidity before a storm. Movement ahead makes him pause and he quietly draws his longsword.

A stag steps out from behind the width of a large tree. It is the same one Will had called out to before and that had taken them to safety. Now it stares at him with dark eyes and bows its great head, plush neck feathers ruffling outwards. Hannibal thinks it is picking at something on the ground before he realizes it is bowing to him and lowers his sword. Behind him is a low noise and he swings his sword around. A figure moves between the line of trees, its body tall and lean. Hannibal smells it before anything else. It has the odor of decaying leaves and old blood. It is darker than the night around them, and the branches above its head twist into jutting antlers.

A clawed hand, long and spiky like thin, black lines on parchment, reaches out towards him as unblinking white eyes focus on him. Its mouth gapes open in a scream that Hannibal feels vibrate inside his skull, and he shuts his eyes as the sound swells.

It took Hannibal a few moments after opening his eyes to realize he was staring at the painted ceiling of his carriage and that the scream echoing in his head was coming from nearby. He was lying on the carriage bench with his coat tucked around him; the one he had left behind the night before. When he looked outside, he saw one of his attendants, Mr. Froideveaux, running towards him.

"Your majesty! We were so worried!" The portly man stopped for breath, bending over, having run up the entire length of the path from the castle's gate. "We figured you were stranded in the village when Mr. Budge said you hadn't returned last night, but then one of the horses showed up, and-- oh my god, this man is dead!"

Although Hannibal couldn't see from within the carriage, he assumed Mr. Froideveaux had discovered his driver's body.

"There was an accident in the woods last night." Hannibal called out and Mr. Froideveaux came to open the carriage door for Hannibal to step out. "I do not recall arriving," he said, pacing around to the front of the carriage where his driver's body had indeed been placed, propped up with his head resting against his shoulder. There was frost still clinging to his hair and face.

Mr. Froideveaux's anxiety was palpable. "He's frozen solid, but we only just saw your carriage appear! How did you make it back without horses and the roads completely blocked? Mr. Budge did say the storm would be worse than predict--"

Hannibal cut through his rambling. "Please have the staff remove Mr. Tier's body to the cellar temporarily. His family should be informed immediately."

Hannibal's instructions were quickly relayed to the group of people spilling out of the castle. Hannibal looked down the path that led into the forest and saw the trees were now covered in heavy snow that shone a bright, innocent white in the early morning sun.

Chapter End Notes

The mead is based on an actual recipe that I've made several times and highly recommend.

Chapter 2

The mysterious circumstances of Hannibal's return to the castle after one of the worst storms in years were all anyone could discuss for weeks. Not only had Hannibal’s carriage survived the journey, completely free of wear and tear, there was the unusual matter of his driver's death, which was even more inexplicable.

The body had been frozen solid, which was to be expected after spending all night in the snow, but what could not be explained was the lack of any kind of outward or inner damage. Hannibal had never seen anything like it. The body was in pristine condition; the only side effect was that it was not alive.

There were murmurings throughout the castle halls of forest spirits and demons. Hannibal had his own suspicions.

When the first mild winter day arrived, nearly two weeks after his nightly adventure in the woods, Hannibal finally found time for a morning ride into the forest.

It was another muted day, the sunlight weak even though it was nearly noon. Reaching a familiar bend in the road, he secured his horse to a slim birch tree and stepped off the path into the woods. He knew this way led to an opening that would lead him to the eastern side of the lake. It was a somewhat complicated way of getting there, but he was in no hurry. Eventually, he spied the glinting, flat expanse of water, easy to see through the exposed limbs of the trees.

He stopped to readjust his pack and take a drink from his flask, debating about cutting into an apple when he stilled, hearing a branch snap to his left. He saw a woman step out from around a large pine, its branches still weighed with snow. The woman was small but Hannibal had the strange impression she was larger than she appeared.

"It isn't wise to stray from the forest path." Her voice was soft and measured.

"I did so deliberately. This is the most direct path to the lake."

"Regardless, one must be careful. The solstice is days away and the early dusk attracts all sorts of unsavory creatures." The woman's eyes were pale blue, made paler by the brightness of the surrounding snow and her blond hair coiffed around her shoulders.

"Do you count yourself among them?"

The woman smiled secretively. “You must be the human that has the forest in such a chitter. There was a rumor of the Forest King rescuing a human from the pixies. It’s been years since he has tangled with your kind. I wondered why he bothered.” She looked at him curiously, her head tilted like a bird’s. “Could it be he sees what I see.”

Hannibal was about to ask the woman what she saw when he noticed her glance past him, her features tightening. He turned to see Will standing before a line of birch trees, his eyes

leveled at the woman. He looked annoyed.

“I’m amazed to see you out of the water this time of year, Bedelia.”

Bedelia inclined her head at Will, her eyes lowered. “The naiads have been incessant in their dialogue about your recent deeds. I decided a change of company was welcome.”

“I’m sure they could use more help preparing for the gathering. Maybe you should see what else needs to be done.”

“Perhaps.” Bedelia inclined her head again and looked at Hannibal, her gaze intent. “You should be more mindful of any magic that comes easily. Magic is never without cost.” She directed her pointed gaze at Will. His expression was somehow more aggravated watching her depart.

“Kelpies are all the same," Will muttered, "Quick to dish out advice and just as quick to drag you into a muddy grave.” He regarded Hannibal. “She’s right, though. About the magic.”

Hannibal looked impassive. “What magic would that be?”

“The kind you’ve been using on your fields...and your workers.”

“My workers?”

“Yes, your workers,” Will repeated back at him, unamused. He was dressed in the nut brown robes Beverly insisted he try on before the gathering. The fur and woolen shoulders, woven through with gleaming strands, were stiff and scratchy and Will kept fidgeting with his sleeve trying unsuccessfully to make it sit right. “It’s untrained, so it’s dangerous. Especially if you’re using it on other humans.”

Hannibal had taken several steps closer and was eyeing the sleeve Will kept flapping irritatedly. “That side is too long, which is why you're so uncomfortable.” He reached out and placed his fingers on the seam at Will’s shoulder. “This part should be taken up.”

Will frowned down at Hannibal’s hand and sighed. “That’s what I kept telling Beverly and she swore I was wrong. Hang on.” He brushed off Hannibal’s hand and replaced it with his own, covering the seam. After a moment he removed it, shaking the sleeve out - it had shortened.

Hannibal marveled at it. "Magic is instinctive for you, Will. Quite literally at your fingertips."

"Well, yeah. It's always been that way."

"Always?"

Will shrugged.

Hannibal studied him with his odd-colored eyes, making Will fidget for a different reason. In the daylight Will could see the color was actually closer to amber than brown, and he was

suddenly aware of how closely they were standing. “What are you doing out here anyway?” Will asked, stepping back a safer distance.

Hannibal smiled, unaffected by the abrupt change in topic. “I think I was hoping to run into you.”

“Didn’t get enough excitement the last time?”

“I wanted to thank you. For returning my driver’s body, and mine, safely to the castle.”

“Your castle, you mean.” Hannibal only looked at him. Will scowled. “Is that really how we’re doing this. Fine." He gave a curt bow that was mostly a jerk of his head and started to walk away.

Hannibal moved with him, a hand held out placatingly. “You are correct, it is my castle. A year ago it was my uncle’s, the late King Robertas.” He searched Will’s face, trying to meet his eyes. “You cannot blame me, Will, for being wary of divulging my identity when you have been equally evasive with your own.”

Will pursed his lips, continuing to avoid his gaze. “I’m not so good with...being social. It’s been a long time since I’ve talked to anyone that wasn’t basically a tree.”

“I thought you were doing fine the night you offered me your wine. After saving me from the pixies and gallantly whisking me away on your magic stag.”

Will’s eyes flitted over his face, eventually giving him a grudging half-smile when he realized he wasn’t being mocked. "It wasn't that gallant."

“On the contrary, it was extraordinary and all anyone up at the castle has been talking about, the little they know. When did you realize who I was?”

“When I saw your driver’s body. His coat had the royal insignias.”

“Of course.” Hannibal smiled. “As I said before, I was very lucky you found me when you did.”

Will led him to a ring of trees he said were young sugar maples, their branches spindly and bare. They were not much taller than Hannibal and formed a circle around a mound of rocks that looked as though they had been placed deliberately, creating a stone bench that faced the lake.

The water closer to the shore had frozen and a mist had formed over the deeper parts of the water. Dead reeds poked out of the snow near the bank, and every so often a chilly wind made the ice clinging to the pines shiver and crack. The mid-afternoon winter sun would soon be setting.

"The equinox is in a few days," Will said quietly, not wanting to disturb the peaceful scene. "There's a gathering that happens every year to celebrate. It's pretty small and not everyone comes, but it's something to look forward to." Will glanced at Hannibal sitting next to him. "You should come."

“It sounds exciting. I will endeavor to make it, barring any courtly matters.” Hannibal considered him steadily. “Are you well, Will? You seem more weary than the last time we met.”

“It’s the season. Or probably the season, I don’t know,” he said, rubbing his fingers into bruised eyes. His cheeks were reddened from the cold and his eyes very blue, the sunlight bringing out the traces of green. Hannibal saw his dark hair had grown out longer, curling softly over his forehead, ears and neck; his scruff more like a beard.

“I’m always affected by the seasons. Part of the job and all that. I usually sleep more this time of year, but lately I’ve been...having bad dreams,” Will said, feeling a bit pathetic.

“Nightmares?”

“Or visions.”

“What do you dream, Will?”

Will hesitated. “The oak forest on fire. The lake reflecting the flames as they reach out like fingers towards a black sky empty of stars. There’s someone screaming. I think it's me." His voice was low and he shuddered. “It’s horrible. I always wake up sweating and feeling like I’m choking.” He glanced at Hannibal whose face was solemn.

“These dreams are perhaps reflective of a general fear for the safety of the forest. You said your energy is tied with the seasons and likely the creatures that live here. The creature from earlier, Bedelia, mentioned it had been a long while since you had interacted with any humans. Perhaps you are having these fears due to my presence in your forest.”

Will frowned. “I don’t feel threatened by you.”

“Even so, change can be stressful, regardless of reason and circumstance.”

Will was quiet, watching a pair of geese honk at each other as they flew over the lake. “It’ll be dark soon. You should get back to your castle.” His voice was teasing.

“I’m not concerned. You’re with me, after all.” Hannibal smiled.

Will huffed, "I don’t want to have to save you again.”

“Or you simply prefer to be the one to end our meetings.”

“What? No, that’s not it.” Will turned to him the same time Hannibal did, their faces less than a foot apart. Will looked like he wanted to lean back. “I actually like talking to you,” he said, not quite meeting Hannibal’s eyes.

“I enjoy our conversations as well.” Hannibal regarded Will’s face in the setting sun, noting how his long lashes cast a shadow under eyes that had turned a deeper blue, like the winter sea. His cheeks were more flushed, the rosy shade the same color as his lips and the tip of his nose. It reminded him of wildflowers in spring.

Will drew away slightly to dig a hand into his pocket, pulling out a unripe acorn. “You’ll need this to come to the gathering.” He reached out and took one of Hannibal’s gloved hands. Will’s own were uncovered but Hannibal could feel the warmth radiating from them through his leather gloves.

Will placed the tiny green nut in the middle of his palm. “Drop it in the snow when you’re in the oak forest and it'll show you the way.” Will’s thumb tracked up to Hannibal’s wrist and under his cuff, stroking once over the skin there before he let go.

They walked back together to where Hannibal’s horse was still tied. Along the way, Will told him more about the creatures that lived in the forest: the water nymphs and tree maidens, the quarrels between the goblins. He learned that Will enjoyed fishing in the warmer months and had read the works of several human poets that Hannibal favored. When they parted, Hannibal rode back to the royal grounds without incident, thinking he could hear whispers in the rustle of the tall pines, but all he saw was the afterimage of Will’s face aglow in the evening sun.

***

On the day of the solstice, Will rose early to meet with Beverly to go over the events for that evening. When Will told her that Hannibal would be attending the festivities, Beverly’s eyes widened.

“Why are you only telling me this now? Do you really think that’s a smart idea?” She was carrying a tray of tall plum cakes, the tops of them sparkling with sugar.

“He’ll be fine.”

“Have you told him what to expect?”

“What’s there to expect? He knows about me. He knows about the others.”

“This is probably the first time a human has ever been to a winter gathering.” Beverly chewed the inside of her cheek as she counted the stack of gold goblets in front of her. “Anything could go wrong, and it’s not like this is just any human. He’s a king!” She eyed Will suspiciously. “Why this human, Will? What’s so interesting about him?”

“He’s not that interesting.”

“Pull the other one.”

Will sighed. “I’m responsible for anything that happens, and nothing will happen.”

Beverly said she would let it go but continued to prod him with questions about Hannibal throughout the day whenever she saw him, which was often. He was able to sneak away when she was busy directing a group of tree trolls carrying large ale barrels into the kitchen.

It would be a clear night, frigid and icy, but with no wind or snow. Will decided to forego extra layers and donned only an ivory shirt and brown coat, the one Hannibal had helped him tailor. The white ermine collar embraced his neck, secured by soft leather ties.

The final piece of his attire was a crown made of a single piece of carefully woven oak branch, the same shade as his coat and with spikes jutting upwards. It was a simple design, much less elaborate than his spring or summer garlands, but just as beautiful and evoking the stark splendor of the season.

Despite his earlier assurances to Beverly about Hannibal's attendance at the gathering, a shard of worry cut at him, and he hoped the night would pass uneventfully.

***

Hannibal scanned the clearing before dropping the acorn in the snow, needing to push it down with a finger since the snow had become compacted. He looked down at it expectantly, unsure of what was supposed to happen.

A few seconds passed and the depression in the snow stayed the same. He wondered briefly if he was in the wrong part of the forest but knew this was the one section that only grew oaks, a strange thing in and of itself.

He glanced up and was startled to see a gigantic oak tree had appeared several yards from him. It was so massive a normal sized door had been carved into it with intricate designs cut into the wood, and a gilded knocker rested in the center. The knocker was shaped into a hammered brass oak leaf the size of his hand and its stem curled into a hook which Hannibal took and knocked once, a heavy echo sounding into the trunk as if it were hollow.

The door swung inwards and Hannibal stepped into warm darkness. When he was all the way inside, the door shut behind him, leaving him entirely blind. He blinked several times trying to adjust to the change and found he could discern glowing blue orbs of light suspended in the air. He followed the orbs deeper into the burrow until he came to a fork. Scenting the air, he detected the aroma of mulled wine seeping from the left tunnel and followed it down. It felt endless, but gradually he noticed the wisps glowing brighter and clustering around an old door cut into the dirt wall. Turning a brass knob, he stepped into a finely decorated hall. Again, the door closed behind him, and when he turned to look, any trace of it had disappeared.

The smell of wine and herbs cooking was very strong now, and there was laughter and excited voices over the music of flutes and percussion. He made his way down the corridor, stepping into a gathering hall filled with the most unusual crowd he had ever seen.

There were petite, colorfully dressed elves, or sprites, dancing in the middle of what was clearly a banquet hall. Off to the side, what could only be goblins held large tankards of ale, belching loudly and gesticulating fervently. There were beautiful maidens and graceful young men, dryads or nymphs, clustered together and talking animatedly.

Tables had been covered with red and gold cloth, every inch filled with plates of food and pitchers of wine. The blue wisps he had followed burned so brightly they were almost white as they flitted around above the revelers' heads and high into the domed ceiling made of packed earth and hanging roots.

At the front of the hall lay a long table, similar to the one in his dining hall up at the castle, and seated in the center of this table was Will, crowned in branches and all alone, looking distracted and slightly tense. He seemed to know he was being watched and his eyes flicked suddenly to Hannibal. He smiled.

Chapter 3

Will noticed Hannibal immediately. Dressed in a finely cut dark coat, his imposing figure drew the eyes of many creatures in the hall. His attire was understated, but his nobility was undeniable as he strode towards Will through the throng of merriment. A group of dancers parted for him, doing their best not to stare openly as they watched him make his way towards Will.

“Good evening, Will.” Hannibal bowed, hand on his chest and over his heart.

“I thought maybe you’d changed your mind.”

“Not at all.” Hannibal looked at the unoccupied chair next to Will. “May I join you?”

“Please.” Will filled a goblet with wine and passed it to Hannibal when he was seated. He held up his own. “Cheers.” They clinked glasses, eyes on each other.

“It was a fascinating journey getting here,” Hannibal said. A bog sprite appeared bearing a plate of dried fruit, cheese, and cured meats. It placed it between them and stared at Hannibal with black eyes as it retreated, skin shimmering an iridescent beetle green. Hannibal felt other curious eyes upon him around the room but when he turned to look, everyone seemed engaged. “Are we still in the oak forest?” he asked.

“Technically. Or rather, that’s neither here nor there.”

Hannibal raised his brows. “What would have happened if I’d chosen to follow your wisps down the other tunnel?”

“You’d have found your way here eventually.”

“I see.” Hannibal sipped his mulled wine, finding it richly spiced.

Will clarified, aware he was being a little rude, “I mean, you wouldn’t have gotten lost. That wasn't my intention. You would’ve ended up at my home, which would have led you here.”

“All doors lead to you, then.” Hannibal smiled at him over his goblet. Will’s throat felt dry even after the several glasses of wine he’d had before Hannibal arrived. He looked down at the food before them.

“You should try the baked stuff. I promise it won't trap you here.”

Hannibal chuckled and chose a small tartlet, which turned out to be filled with mincemeat when he bit into it, the center still warm. “This is excellent. My compliments to the chef.”

“You can tell her in person.” Will watched as Beverly made her way over to them with a wide grin, her cheeks pink from dancing.

“You must be Hannibal. I’m Beverly. Will’s talked a lot about you.” Will glared at her.

“Has he?” Hannibal was looking at him, so Will looked at his wine.

“Only good things, I promise. Have you tried the mead? Will makes it himself. He also caught the game for the stew.”

“I’ve tasted his mead before. It was exquisite.”

Will thought the compliment sounded rather suggestive.

"These are just as sublime," Hannibal added, holding up his tartlet. Beverly beamed.

“Maybe I’ll catch up with you two later. Enjoy the party, Your Majesty,” she said, tipping her head and managing to sound sincere. She winked at Will and he felt his face heat.

“Do you have any traditions like this up at the castle?” Will asked, watching Hannibal, who was reaching for the stew Beverly mentioned.

“There’s an annual feast to celebrate the new year, but it’s a great deal less exciting than this. I was actually hoping you’d attend.”

Hannibal paused a moment before producing a thick envelope from his coat pocket stamped with a red wax seal and Will’s name on the front in beautiful calligraphy. Will realized what it was as Hannibal handed over the invitation but did not reach to take it.

“I can’t,” Will blurted out. Hannibal’s normally inscrutable face seemed surprised.

“I mean, thank you, but no. I don’t mingle with humans,” Will amended.

“I’m human,” Hannibal said, amused.

Will shook his head. “You’re one human. Even among my own kind it can feel like too much. These gatherings leave me drained for days.”

“What makes it feel like too much?”

Will toyed with the stem of his goblet. “It’s hard to describe. Mostly it just feels like...hunger.”

"Your own or something else?"

“Both.”

“What do you feel right now?”

Will exhaled a shaky breath. “Fear. There’s a rabbit running across the snow covered field above us, hungry and cold. A fox has been tracking it for miles and probably hasn’t eaten in days.”

“Whose fear do you feel more strongly? The rabbit's or the fox's?"

Will glanced at him. Hannibal's eyes glittered from the lights floating above.

“The rabbit's, because it’s more vulnerable," Will said quietly after a moment, a hint of uncertainty betraying his words.

Hannibal tilted his head, weighing that. “The fox is vulnerable too. It’s weakened by hunger and just as afraid.” He took a bite of stew and closed his eyes to savor it. “This is delicious, Will. What’s the meat?”

“Boar.”

Hannibal gave him an unreadable look before his face seemed to soften. “It’s natural to identify with other predators, Will.”

“You think I’m a predator.”

“Aren’t you?”

“Are *you?*”

Hannibal’s smile was wide. “I enjoy hunting.”

“I prefer to fish.”

“I know. You seem to have me on your hook. For what purpose, I wonder.”

Will looked away and at the rest of the hall. The crowded room was suddenly stifling under Hannibal’s intense gaze.

“Will.” Hannibal’s voice was low and intimate. Will stood abruptly and realized his error a second too late as the entire hall stopped. Voices and music ceased and the dancers turned to him, faces expectant and breathless.

He held out his hands in what he hoped was a welcoming manner and partly to steady himself. He sighed.

“Forgive me, but it is good to see you all again on this longest of nights.” He paused. Across the room, Beverly gave him an encouraging smile. “We celebrate the season tonight with the human king, whom I ask that you honor and delight.” He looked around, avoiding the one gaze he felt the most, searing into his skin. “Happy Solstice.”

These last words were said in the language of the forest and the sentiment was echoed back by the crowd as he raised his cup, a joyful cheer erupting at the same time the music did, and the hall becoming a blur of motion once more. Now with his unspoken permission, there were other creatures flocking up to the head table, eager to meet the handsome newcomer.

Will drained his wine in one gulp. “I need some air,” he said in Hannibal’s direction. “Beverly will let me know if I’m needed, so you should be all right on your own for a while.” Hannibal didn’t say anything but Will felt his eyes follow him out of the room.

***

Will wasn't sure where he was going. He did in fact need some air but entertained the idea of going home and forgoing the rest of the gathering entirely. Surely they wouldn't miss him, especially with Hannibal there to gawp at. He could finish his opened bottle of mead and pass out in front of the fire, which was becoming a tradition for him, if not a habit. Beverly would make sure Hannibal returned to the castle safely, but it still felt like he was leaving him to the wolves. The fantasy was tantalizing, yet when he closed his eyes, all he could see were a pair of amused amber eyes.

Will turned a corner, lost in thought, and soon realized he'd ended up in the corridor that led to the kitchens. He passed an open storeroom and only noticed the figure moving inside when a hand reached out and grabbed him, pulling him into the cramped room.

Will's alarm turned to unexpected amusement and then alarm again as he realized it was Hannibal crowding him into the room.

"What are you– we'll be covered in flour," Will said breathlessly as he was backed into a stack of flour sacks. Hannibal's eyes were very dark, appearing almost red in the low light from a lantern placed in a wall nook.

"I'll dust you off," Hannibal murmured. "You look very handsome, Will."

"So do you," Will said automatically, surprised at his honesty, but it wasn't a lie. This close Will could see the pattern in Hannibal's overcoat, which was black velvet and embroidered. The shadows on Hannibal's face highlighted his angular features, making him look almost inhuman and like something that lived in the deep forest. Will would know.

"You said you would delight me tonight," Hannibal said.

"I don't think those were my exact words."

"No?"

Will's hands had landed on Hannibal's chest in their shuffle and now he trailed them down to his waist where a large garnet stone was centered in his belt. He traced the gemstone with his fingers, the fiery red sparkling, before dipping two fingers behind the belt and tugging Hannibal closer until their chests almost touched, his earlier reservations melting away as he felt the heat radiating from Hannibal's body.

"Hannibal," he said slowly, and a flash of pleasure flickered across Hannibal's face at his name on Will's tongue.

"Were you looking for something back here?" Will asked, staring at Hannibal's mouth and the fullness of his upper lip.

"Only you." Hannibal's tongue darted out to wet his lip. Will swallowed.

"Looks like you found me," he said, a little faintly. "You should know better than to corner an animal. Sometimes we bite."

"What sort of animal are you?"

“Well, I’m bigger than a fox,” Will said with a grin.

Hannibal kissed him then, hands coming up to hold his face and nape. Will angled his head to slot their mouths together more fully and felt the press of Hannibal’s tongue. He opened for him, feeling him lick inside and sweep over his teeth, pushing deeper. Will sucked on his tongue, teeth pressing down and holding, and Hannibal made a low noise.

Hands wandered down to grip Will's waist, lips dragging along his jaw and their stubbles catching. Will clutched handfuls of Hannibal’s shirt and tugged upwards to expose skin incredibly warm and solid. Hannibal’s mouth found Will’s neck as Will tried to shove a hand down past the belt of Hannibal’s trousers. Hannibal bit him and he yelped, his surprise turning into a moan as Hannibal sucked on the mark he’d made.

The sound seemed to encourage Hannibal and he pressed Will harder into the flour stack behind him, wedging a thigh between Will’s legs and grinding into him. Will could feel Hannibal’s erection and groaned, an embarrassingly needy sound, and Hannibal kissed him hungrily.

“I need- I need to-” Will broke away, feeling almost feverish, and gasped, “God, Hannibal, take off your clothes.”

Hannibal breathed out a laugh and quickly undid his shirt, pulling it over his head. Will did the same and also shucked off his trousers, removing his crown in the process and placing it carelessly on the pile of clothing. Suddenly there was so much skin and Will barely had a second to take it all in before Hannibal was crowding him again, kissing him, and digging fingers into Will's hair.

Will's cock bumped wetly into Hannibal’s stomach, and Hannibal wrapped a hand around him, stroking him once, twice. Will's forehead dropped onto Hannibal’s shoulder with another groan. It had been so long since anyone had touched him, and never so greedily. Hannibal gripped Will’s hips and then reached around to his ass, hauling him up to thrust their cocks together into the tight, wet space between their bodies.

Will’s cock was leaking everywhere as he grasped Hannibal’s shoulders. His bitten off moans seemed to make Hannibal press against him harder, panting loudly in Will's ear and his thrusts becoming uneven. His mouth found Will's again, sharp teeth catching and biting into his lower lip, and Will cried out into Hannibal’s mouth as he came, spilling hotly onto Hannibal’s stomach.

Hannibal reached to swipe a hand through the mess, coating his palm and using it to stroke himself fast and slick. Will watched him with hooded eyes as Hannibal exhaled harshly, his own come soon mixing in with Will’s on his hand. He lifted his hand to taste both of them there and Will leaned in to lick at Hannibal’s mouth, moaning at the salty, musky flavor he found.

Will gave a shaky laugh when he leaned back. "There’s flour in your hair."

Hannibal was looking at him heatedly, his breath still a little irregular. “Yours as well.”

Their come was quickly cooling, most of it on Hannibal, so Will bent down to grab his shirt on the floor to clean them. Hannibal took the opportunity to dip his head to mouth at the bruise he'd made on Will's neck and Will reached a hand into Hannibal's hair, urging his head up until their lips met in a tender kiss.

They broke apart when someone banged on the door.

"Hey, we need more wine! Bring some out when you get back!" It was Beverly's voice and they heard her footsteps retreat in the direction of the party.

Will laughed at the displeased expression on Hannibal's face. "I have a better idea," he said.

He took Hannibal's hand, both of them still naked, and tugged them towards the storeroom door. He looked mischievously over his shoulder at Hannibal, who returned his look with curiosity, a flush on his high cheekbones and hair disheveled.

Will tapped the door handle once with his finger and then opened it. Instead of the corridor leading to the kitchens, it now showed Will's home, specifically his sitting room with the bed in the middle. He stepped through, Hannibal right behind him.

"Are we leaving the gathering?"

"We're getting more wine, or more accurately, my mead."

They did not end up back at the party. After several bottles of Will's honey wine and watching Will crack roasted chestnuts in a makeshift metal nutcracker, Hannibal had Will spread out under him on the rug by the fire and was licking into the hollow of his collarbone.

"You smell incredible," Will said. He thought he was probably pretty drunk.

Hannibal hummed. "What do I smell like?" He nosed his way across Will's chest and swiped his tongue over a nipple. Will shivered.

"Like, like the forest after it rains, but also spicy, like some kind of herb."

"That sounds like how I'd describe your scent. You might be smelling yourself."

Will giggled. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm quite serious. Your scent is stronger now than before." Hannibal raised himself up and breathed in Will's hair. "Yes, much stronger. You smell of pleasure." He kissed Will's temple and trailed his mouth back down to the nipple he had been tormenting.

"Hannibal." Will rested a hand in Hannibal's fine hair. "I need to ask you something."

Hannibal moved lower and Will heard him inhale deeply when he reached the curling hair around Will's cock. He felt Hannibal tonguing into the crease of his groin and shuddered, pressing on before he lost his train of thought.

"You know the magic you've been doing. I think it's been affecting me."

“Is that what’s affecting you.”

Hannibal licked across his cock and he gripped Hannibal’s hair tighter. Hannibal took that as encouragement and swallowed Will completely. His mouth was wet and hot and Will moaned at the sudden sensation. Hannibal pulled back to suckle at the tip until clear fluid started leaking out, making him suck harder and taking him deeper. Will could feel himself bumping against the back of Hannibal’s throat with every shift of his head.

Hannibal’s hands cupped Will’s ass, lifting him in slow thrusts into his mouth. It was dizzying and Will wanted to thrust harder, so he did, and Hannibal moaned, the vibration traveling up Will’s cock and making him quiver. He continued to rut and Hannibal let him, his mouth narrow and perfect.

“*Hannibal*,” he whined; he was so close. The hand wrapped around the base of his cock reached down to cup his balls, brushing a finger over his hole and teasing just a little before pressing hard into the space above. His hips jerked up, and he was coming thickly down Hannibal’s throat, his body spasming and fingers digging into Hannibal’s scalp. Hannibal swallowed around him, making a sound that Will felt more than heard.

He continued to suck, long after Will had anything left to give and only pulled off when Will cried out for him to stop, pushing at his head. Will could see Hannibal’s cock flushed dark in his hand. He touched the back of Hannibal’s thigh. “Come here,” he said softly, and Hannibal moved to straddle his chest.

Will raised his head to take the tip of Hannibal’s cock in his mouth, licking across the exposed head and foreskin that had been pulled back. Hannibal breathed out shakily, whispered Will's name and touched a hand to his cheek, cupping gently.

Will glanced up and caught dark eyes fixed on him. He closed his, feeling overwhelmed, and focused on the silky hardness of Hannibal’s cock, his head moving forward to meet Hannibal’s careful thrusts that gradually grew rougher, hands keeping his head still. Will opened his eyes when he heard Hannibal’s breath rush out, feeling him throb as wet heat filled his mouth. Keeping a hand in his hair, Hannibal moved over him, covering him with his body and catching the bit of come on that had ended up on Will’s lips with his own before taking his mouth in a fervid kiss.

***

“Tell me about your magic, Will,” Hannibal said into the quiet warmth of the room. They lay nestled together, Will’s head resting on Hannibal’s shoulder and a blanket pulled over them. The fire had burned to mostly coals.

Will was silent for a moment. “I don’t know what to say except that it feels...heavier. It might be due to you, but you aren’t the first human to dabble. There was a girl in the village who worked a charm to banish her brother and ended up killing him. I felt the force of the spell from here. What have you done besides trying to improve your fields?”

“Only the efficiency of my workers, so they don’t tire as easily.”

“You shouldn’t be using it on other humans.”

“No one has been harmed.”

“So far. Have you told them you’ve enchanted them?”

“It would only concern them.”

Will lifted his head up to frown at Hannibal. “You don’t think their consent is necessary?” Hannibal only looked at him blankly. “Hannibal, you could be hurting them and not know it. Maybe permanently.”

“They would have shown symptoms by now.”

“You don’t know that.” Will worried his lip, brow furrowed. “Can you show me the spell you used?” he asked.

“I will if you accept my invitation to attend the New Year’s feast at the castle.”

Will’s eyes widened. “I told you I can’t. I wouldn’t be able to handle it.”

“I disagree,” Hannibal said, undeterred. Will studied him.

“Do I have to dress up?”

Hannibal smiled, eyes an aged honey wine in the firelight. “Just come as you are.”

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Hey! Thanks for the kudos! :D

It was almost dawn and Will was doing up the ties on his coat, heading back to the gathering. The corridors were empty and he could hear the music had stopped. Movement ahead made him glance up and he saw Beverly heading towards him, almost at a run, her face wild with alarm.

“Will! Where have you been! I’ve been looking everywhere.” Beverly grabbed his arm when she approached, dragging him back down the narrow hallway where he had come. “A body’s been found by the kitchens."

“*What?* Who?”

"A naiad. Marissa."

"What? What was she doing out of the water?”

The naiads marked the season with their own winter celebration deep in the lake where the water was still warm and rarely emerged before the last frost.

“Sneaking out to meet her friend, apparently. Abigail, you know her, she lives in the oak forest.”

“Where’s Abigail now?”

“I put her in one of the rooms off the main hall and locked it just in case. She’s terrified, Will. She found Marissa’s body and freaked out, showed up at the gathering with blood all over her. I’ve never seen a party sober up so fast.”

“Where’s Marissa? I need to see her.”

"I know." She took him to one of the storerooms where Marissa’s body lay on a cleared table, cloth covering her.

“Her lungs are missing,” Beverly said as Will moved the sheet back. Someone, probably Beverly, had wiped most of the blood from her, leaving just the fine cut made down the center of Marissa’s chest where the skin had been pulled back. Her ribs had been cracked open to expose her organs; the removal of her lungs creating a gaping cavity that held only a lonely heart. Will rested his hand on Marissa’s arm, her skin cold and stiff. “Do you feel anything?” Beverly asked, staring at his hand, transfixed.

“No, nothing. This wasn’t the work of magic.” He pointed to Marissa’s neck which was bruised into dark finger shapes. “She was strangled.”

“Why take her lungs then?”

Will didn’t have an answer for that. While it was true that organs were sometimes used in darker magic, it was odd Marissa’s body held no trace of magic besides her own. All creatures of the forest contained magic that left a unique imprint, like the outline of a fingerprint, but Will felt only Marissa’s.

“They must’ve been human, Will.”

Will frowned down at the smudge of dried blood on Marissa’s cheek. “Maybe.”

“Where’s Hannibal? I thought he was with you.” Will caught the edge in Beverly’s voice and turned to look at her.

“He just left,” he said. Beverly gave him a pointed look. “What, you suspect him? After saying you were worried someone would try to do him in?”

“It’s strange, isn’t it? There hasn’t been a death at one of these things in years and now, the first time we invite a human, someone’s killed right under our nose?”

“Hannibal didn’t murder a young girl. What reason would he have? And anyways, he was with me the whole night.” She raised her eyebrows at him.

"The whole night huh."

"Stop that." She smirked at him, but her face was still troubled. “I’m worried, Will. This whole year has been weird and you know it. It’s almost like we were waiting for something like this to happen.”

Will nodded, absently, his eyes drifting back to Marissa’s throat where the life had been crushed out of her. Will felt like he was missing something. He thought about telling Beverly that he’d found Hannibal in one of the storerooms, seemingly looking for Will. He also thought about mentioning that when he and Hannibal had gone back to fetch their clothes, hands grasping one another and a promise from Will to be at the castle feast that was sealed with a lingering kiss, Will’s oak crown was nowhere to be found.

“Take me to Abigail,” he said instead.

They found Abigail where Beverly had left her, huddled in one of the chairs by the fire and a quilt wrapped tightly around her. Her head was bowed, and Will was reminded of a doe’s head nosing at the earth. He approached her just as cautiously, taking a seat beside her, and she looked up at him. He thought he saw something flash across her face before disappearing, leaving only frightened, wide blue eyes staring back at him.

“Abigail. I’m so sorry about Marissa,” he said gently. Abigail pressed her lips together, but she didn’t look like she was going to cry.

“I didn’t think she’d be here. Not after her mom caught her the last time.”

“Beverly said you found her. Why were you back by the kitchens?”

“I followed her. I think she was trying to find me. I saw her at the gathering looking around and then she left.”

“Did you see anyone else?”

“We had plans to see each other in the spring. It’s all my fault.” Her breath hitched.

Will reached out to take one of her hands that was warm and soft. “No, Abigail.” He looked over at Beverly who placed a hand on Abigail’s shoulder.

“We’ll find out who did this,” she said, her eyes meeting Will’s. “Do you know if Marissa was meeting anyone besides you?”

“No, no I don’t think so.” Abigail gazed down at her hand in Will’s. “She would’ve told me.”

“Had she been seeing anyone?” Will asked. “A friend? A lover?” Abigail snorted.

“Definitely not.”

“And you didn’t see anyone when you found her,” Will confirmed. Abigail shook her head slowly and lifted her eyes to Will, blue eyes earnest.

“Not a single creature.”

***

Will spent the time leading up to Hannibal’s new year’s celebration regretting his decision to attend. It did not help that Beverly was supportive about the whole thing, telling him she was glad he was “putting himself out there” and “making friends” and that the forest would survive him “off duty” for one night. It was a complete one-eighty from her hesitations about Hannibal coming to the gathering. Will understood part of her enthusiasm came from her having assured Marissa’s parents he would be investigating their daughter’s death by interrogating Hannibal while there. His guilt over Marissa made him bite his tongue from making any serious protests.

The mild weather persisted although the temperature ensured most creatures kept holed up underground. Perhaps whatever abnormality that was upsetting the forest had also decided to take a winter break.

On the night of Hannibal’s feast, Will dressed himself in what he hoped would pass as human, aware he was making an effort to look nice even though he’d said he didn’t want to wear anything formal. He had spent the week discreetly gathering clothes from the nearby

village and ended up with a sage green coat, a tiny red berry pattern stitched around the edges, and a pair of tan leather boots. As payment for these stolen goods he'd left a hand-carved bone fishing hook and a note that promised it would always land a fish.

Will was only moderately surprised when he showed up at the castle door and the attendants there did not bat an eye when he gave his name and presented his invitation, silently ushering him through. He supposed Hannibal had informed them to expect him but the thought gave him little comfort. If anything he was already feeling unraveled, surrounded by the smattering of people in the entrance hall and the ache of the forest a mile off weakened yet ever present. It had taken him half an hour of staring at the castle turrets and watching the procession of people filtering past the gate before he'd mustered up the nerve to tread up to the front door.

Inside the hall could only be described as breathtaking. Although Hannibal had said he preferred Will's gathering to his own, it was clear he had spared no expense. Antlers were the main decoration and had been woven into garlands of evergreen and gold ribbon, artfully placed high on the wall and wrapped around balusters. He could hear a minstrel band playing in another room, a harp accompanying a soft voice. Will craned his head back to study the fresco on the ceiling lit by a candle chandelier; it depicted an unusual painting of a woodland scene where a hunting party stalked what looked like an antlered wolf. He was aware there were people clustered around him whispering, and he caught his name said in a hushed tone.

"It's a little creepy isn't it," someone said to his right. It was a beautiful woman dressed in royal blue and silver drop earrings, her dark hair curling around her pale neck and a kind smile reflected in blue eyes that sparkled. "You must be Will. I'm Alana," she said, politely inclining her head. "Is this your first visit?"

"Yes. No. No, I've been here before but not in a very long time," Will said, taken aback by her beauty and openness. "How do you know who I am?" he asked.

"Because you're the only person here I haven't met before. And because lately I've heard your name brought up in almost every conversation with His Grace." She laughed at his look. "Don't worry, only favorably, I promise. He says you saved him from some kind of wild animal."

"Did he." Will wanted to roll his eyes. "What kind of animal?"

"A boar," said a voice to his left. A hand landed on his shoulder and Will turned and it was Hannibal. He was staring at Will, looking him over intently, and smiling with his amber eyes. "I was out walking in the forest," he said to Alana, "and Will trapped the creature. He is a keen hunter."

"That's giving me too much credit," Will said, staring right back and playing along. Hannibal was dressed in a deep green brocade coat with gold and burgundy thread. He matched the decorations, to Will's amusement, and to an extent Will's own outfit, which was less amusing.

"I owe him a debt," Hannibal continued. Will thought of Hannibal's overturned carriage in deep snow and said nothing.

Alana was looking between the two of them. “Will was just saying he’s been here before, Your Grace.” Hannibal raised an eyebrow.

“It was a long time ago,” Will said, not wanting to get into it, but Alana seemed interested.

“Then you must have known the late King Robertas,” she said.

“Uh, no.” Hannibal was studying him closely and the unsteady feeling was back, made worse by the voices around him likely wondering why he was taking up so much of the King’s attention. He was saved from having to elaborate by the sound of a horn announcing dinner.

“Let us adjourn to the dining hall,” Hannibal said, smiling graciously. “Lady Alana.” Will thought he was going to offer his arm to her but instead Hannibal took Will’s hand and placed it in the crook of his elbow, hand over his, clearly indicating he intended Will to walk with him. Alana followed after them, looking entertained.

***

Dinner went on for several hours. Will was prevented from having to make anything greater than small talk since he was seated next to Hannibal, who treated any discussion like a performance, one he was very good at. Everyone seemed to think Will was some sort of fisherman-hunter that lived in the village outskirts and had heroically rescued Hannibal from a boar -- “no a pack of wolves, no it was a robber” -- or so the tale went, and was why Will was given the honor of sitting at the head table beside the King.

Will enjoyed seeing Hannibal in his element and was pleased to be introduced to Lady Komeda, who was very charming and full of stories about everyone in the room. She told him about how much of Hannibal's early adulthood was spent abroad where he had taken up an interest in medicine, specifically surgery.

“And cooking,” she said. “Isn’t that a funny pairing. I suppose the two do go hand in hand.”

“Something about being able to butcher your own quarry,” Will suggested, and Lady Komeda cackled.

Will felt a set of heavy eyes on him and looked across the room at a man not eating or engaged with anyone, but quietly sipping his wine. Lady Komeda tracked his gaze and pursed her lips.

“That’s Mr. Tobias Budge,” she said in an undertone. “He’s a musician and reputedly very good, although I’ve never heard him play.”

“What does he play?”

“Oh, a bit of everything they say. He also claims to be well read in magic.”

Will frowned. He was about to ask her what else she knew about the musician when he felt Hannibal's hand brush his thigh, squeezing softly.

"How do you find my feast, Will?"

Will hummed. "I like that there's less dancing." Hannibal's mouth curled into a small smile.

"Then you would not enjoy our summer celebrations. Dancing is the main event."

"I think I could handle it, with the right company." He looked up at Hannibal coyly.

Hannibal's smile grew, his eyes dark. "I should like to see you when the days are long, among the verdant hills and budding flowers, right at home in your woods. You said you would show me your favorite fishing spot."

Will blushed. "You might get your wish sooner than you think, the way the weather's been."

"Yes, the weather has been very odd!" someone interjected loudly, picking up on the tail end of their quiet exchange.

"His Grace had to cancel his autumn hunting party this year because of that early storm, such a shame," another person chimed in.

Will was aware of the castle's annual hunting party, a tradition carried over from King Robertas. It was a time when creatures of the forest made themselves scarce.

"Maybe it was for the best, what with all that talk about evil spirits lurking about," the first person said, rather drunk and still too loud.

"And the great beast!" someone else added. A few around the table flinched while others tried not to sneer outright.

"Beast?" Will asked.

Down at the far end of the table, Mr. Budge scoffed. "That's just a legend you tell misbehaving children."

Lady Komeda's laugh tinkled. "All legends are based on some degree of truth, I say. It's very likely a great monster did prowl the forest at some point."

"You're an avid hunter, Will, have you come across any beasts on your forest trips?" It was Lady Alana asking with teasing smile.

Faces turned to him, some curious and others skeptical. He thought of wet leaves and sharp teeth, a hunger that squatted and waited in the depths of the forest. "No," he said, "but one time I did catch an unusually large badger that had fallen into peat bog. It stunk to high heaven."

Everyone laughed and Hannibal refilled Will's wine, smiling mildly but his attention rapt. Discussion turned to politics and then the advancements Hannibal was making, particularly

in the areas of science and medicine, where he was providing more paper for the production of manuscripts.

Will focused on his meal, which was a seasoned braised meat that was very tender. Hannibal kept a hand on his thigh under the table, occasionally rubbing circles into his leg with his thumb when he spoke. It was very distracting.

An attendant entered the room, making a beeline for Hannibal and bending down to murmur something in his ear. A crease formed between Hannibal's brows, his fingers tightening on Will's thigh. The attendant left and Hannibal gave him a look he couldn't quite fathom before placing the wine in his hand on the table and rising steadily from his seat. Those in the hall did so as well, the conversation fizzling out, and Will rose to stand next to him, feeling Mr. Budge looking at him again.

"Forgive my rudeness," Hannibal said to the room, "but there is a situation that requires my attention. I ask that you please continue enjoying your dinner." He called for more wine to be brought out before turning to Will, touching his arm and leaning in to place his lips to Will's ear, saying in a low voice, "I need you to come with me, Will. One of my servants has been found dead."

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal watched as Will examined the now deceased body of his most enthusiastic, if at times intolerable attendant, Franklyn Froideveaux. Will hovered a hand over Franklyn's arm before placing it down resolutely and closing his eyes. He opened them almost immediately, face a mixture of surprise and weariness as he looked at Hannibal across the corpse.

"Your guess was right, this wasn't magic," Will said.

Hannibal nodded, eyeing the body. "Strangulation then, or exsanguination. If the former failed, the latter certainly succeeded." He bent to study the area where Franklyn's neck was severely discolored, a striking contrast from the pallor of the undamaged skin around it, hours old now and rigid. He noticed that Will's eyes were rooted to Franklyn's torso which had been messily broken open and revealed his stolen heart.

"This time by some sort of wire, maybe," Will said quietly, more to himself than Hannibal.

"This time?" Hannibal's eyes flicked up to his and Will's gaze scattered. "Have you seen a body like this before?"

Will seemed to deliberate internally with something before he said, "Yes, but not like this exactly. There was a girl strangled. At the solstice gathering." Will met his eyes again, a fierceness in the striking blue. "Her lungs were removed."

"You believe the same person that killed the girl did this."

"Who else?" Will had a peculiar expression on his face, almost wary. "It's a pattern with a common thread."

Hannibal blinked slowly at him. "Is there something you want to ask me, Will?"

"I'm not sure." The glint in his eyes reminded Hannibal of the blue flame he could create in his hand. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

"Are you asking if I did this?"

"Did you?"

Hannibal spread his hands. "What reason would I have?"

"I feel like I should be asking that question."

"Then ask me."

"Why did I find you by the kitchens that night?"

“I was looking for you.”

Will shook his head and smiled, but there was no humor there. “Please.” His jaw worked several times before he asked, “Did you kill a young girl at the gathering? Don’t lie to me, Hannibal, I’ll know,” he added, a growl curled around the last word.

Hannibal considered him. “No,” he said. They stared at each other. After a moment, Will nodded once and looked down at Franklyn and the bloody opening of his chest.

“Fine. Good,” he said. He rubbed a hand over his mouth before he asked, “Do you know who did?”

“No. But there are ways to reveal who did.”

“Let’s hear it then.” Will said tersely, the bite still in his words.

“Will.” Will had started to pace away and turned around. Hannibal’s eyes were fond, creased around the edges. “Despite this turn of events, I’m very glad you are here. I know it isn’t easy, being this far from the forest.”

Will’s ire deflated a bit. “It isn’t easy,” he said, then sighed, “But I’m glad to be here.” He tried for a smile that fell into a frown. “I just want to know what’s going on, Hannibal.”

“I want the same.”

Will avoided Hannibal trying to capture his gaze. "Tell me about this idea of yours," Will said, still feeling wrung out.

"For that I would need to know more about how your magic works. I assume from your efforts earlier that you would be able to tell who murdered Mr. Froideveaux if they had used magic?"

"If I met the person, yeah, probably. Magic leaves a signature. Magic creatures especially. Humans tend to leave nothing, but that's not always true. I can feel traces of your signature all over the castle, from where you’ve done magic."

Hannibal was fascinated. "Can you? What does it feel like?"

“It feels like you,” Will said, shrugging and looking a little embarrassed.

“And other humans that do magic? Can you feel their traces too?”

“Well, no. Just you.” Will rubbed at the back of his neck, flustered under Hannibal’s questioning.

"Why just me?"

Now Will looked actually embarrassed, his cheeks tinged pink. "I think because of our recent...contact."

Will saw when Hannibal understood. "Intimacy," he said, frowning.

"I'd forgotten it can happen," Will said quickly. "I'm sorry I didn't warn you."

"Don't apologize. I was only disappointed that I cannot feel you the same way."

"Oh. Well, you can, if you really wanted to." The blush in Will's cheeks now extended up to his ears, which he could see were tipped red when he ducked his head. "I can show you."

"In that case, you should stay the night. So we can discuss this killer and you can show me what it is you want to show me."

Will started to smile. "Are those the only reasons you want me to stay? I don't know, Hannibal, it might be best for me to get back to the forest."

Hannibal's lips quirked. "Will you give me a chance to try and convince you?"

"Are we really flirting over a dead body right now?"

"You did not answer my question."

Will huffed out a laugh. "You can try."

***

Will spent the rest of the evening essentially hiding in Hannibal's library as Hannibal returned to his guests who were having after-dinner drinks while they watched the harpist perform. Will was not interested in participating in any further social obligations and agreed that Hannibal could use him as his excuse for being pulled from the feast -- their abrupt departure due to an unexpected emergency in Will's family and Hannibal politely seeing him off. He was, in all honesty, feeling a bit like he was having an emergency of his own.

The body in Hannibal's cellar was largely the cause, but Will was also fretting about the suggestion he'd made to Hannibal about completing their half-formed connection. It was a foolish idea. Will had never tried it with anyone before, especially not a human, and he had no frame of reference. He wasn't entirely certain why he'd even offered; it merely seemed like the fair thing to do at the time.

Will's thoughts circled with him as he made another lap around the vast library room of Hannibal's estate. The fireplace was lit and cast tall, dancing shadows over the many rows of books, some he suspected were as ancient as the castle itself.

There were landscape paintings positioned uniformly along the walls, and above his head stretched another fresco the entire width of the ceiling. It illustrated yet another forest scene, this time in winter just after sunset, the snow luminous in the owl light. A dark animal slinked between bare tree limbs. The flickering firelight gave the impression of movement,

the ends of the branches spreading sharp, as sharp as the antlers on the animal's head that turned to look at him.

“Will.” He startled and stumbled back into Hannibal, who caught him around the shoulders.

“Sorry,” he said, feeling like his heart was trying to escape his chest. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“No, you appeared quite preoccupied.” Hannibal regarded him carefully. “Are you all right, Will?”

“Yeah. Fine,” he answered, maybe a little too hastily because Hannibal looked doubtful.

He saw Hannibal had dressed down and had removed his fancy coat. He wore a simple white shirt, long sleeves rolled to his elbows and exposing his forearms. “Your ah-- Did your guests leave?” Will asked.

“Yes. Lady Komeda and Lady Alana send their sincere wishes for your family’s health in the new year.”

“Did you tell them about Franklyn?”

“No.”

“Don't you think we should warn them?”

“Are you always so selfless, Will?”

“What?”

“You are more worried with the safety of others than your own.”

Will frowned at him. “Should I be worried for my safety?”

“I think so. You said this pattern had a common thread. It is not impossible that thread is you.”

Will raised his eyebrows at that. “So someone’s trying to kill me? By...killing others around me?”

“They could be trying to get your attention.” Hannibal was looking at him with concern that made him defensive.

“I can handle myself.”

“I would agree with you, however, you said your magic has felt weaker, as of late.”

“No, not weaker, that’s not what I said.”

Hannibal said nothing but moved to close the gap between them, cupping a large, warm palm around his cheek. Will met Hannibal’s calm, dark eyes that were like the forest lake on a

windless evening -- the surface a mirror.

“I care greatly for you, Will. I do not want to see you harmed,” he said, so gently. Will looked down and away. He sighed.

“Then let’s figure something out."

They spent the next few hours while the logs burned low, poring over old spellbooks, many of which Will owned copies of himself, and some that were indeed older than the castle and possibly the forest too. Hannibal said they were looking for a locating spell, or something of that nature, having come across one once before.

Will sipped the wine he held, turning a page in his book, and stopped at an image of a menacing fanged creature with fur and sharp horns. Hannibal, seated across the small table from him, looked up when he heard Will’s audible inhale. Will placed the book on the table and angled it towards him.

“What is this? I’ve seen it painted all over the castle.”

Hannibal was silent for a moment. “You don’t recognize it?” he asked. Will glanced back down at the animal.

“Should I?”

“It’s the beast that lives in the forest. I thought you would be familiar with it.” Will looked to see if Hannibal was joking, but he was unsmiling, eyes evaluating him.

“You’re kidding, right. I thought we all agreed that was a story spread by the pixies.”

“Do they spread such stories?”

“Of course. It keeps people away from the forest.”

“I take it you haven’t seen it then.”

“The beast? Have you?” he asked, incredulously.

“Yes. I spent many of my summers here as a young boy. There was a summer I wandered into the forest near nightfall, unaware of the risk. The creature found me and chased me through the trees, all the way to the castle grounds.”

“Hannibal,” he said, shaking his head, “It was probably an overgrown wolf.” He tried not to laugh. “You’re probably lucky to be alive,” he added.

"I know what I saw."

Will let the matter drop, hearing the finality of Hannibal's words.

The mood had shifted subtly in the room. Will felt a little bad for being dismissive, but he also didn't want to entertain any fantasies, especially dangerous ones. He was working

through an apology in his head when Hannibal stood, coming around the table to stand before him. When Will raised his head, Hannibal's face was shadowed in the low light from the fire, his expression shuttered. His eyes were the only part that moved -- quiet ripples across the lake surface -- as they scanned Will's face.

"Will you stay with me tonight?" he asked.

Will swallowed, nodded, and Hannibal bent to kiss him.

***

Will felt a sense of déjà vu as he looked around Hannibal's bedroom, remembering when Hannibal had first explored his own home, weeks ago now. The room was less opulent than the rest of the castle, not as many gold trimmings, and designed in cool, blue hues reminiscent of a spring sky, or the lesser known faerie pools where the water remained a brilliant azure all year long. Will had pissed off a few fae when trying to fish there, but the colorful fish had been too tempting.

"What are you thinking?" Hannibal said, watching Will take in the room.

Will hummed. "I was thinking there's a part of the forest you'd like. It's hard to get to, but worth it."

Hannibal smiled. "That is true for many things. I would enjoy the challenge."

The fireplace had been freshly made up prior to their arrival and illuminated the room in a cheerful glow. Wind blew against the window that faced the forest, rattling the pane. Will ran a hand through the furs piled high on the bed, the hairs glossy in the firelight.

"Do you always sleep with so many layers?"

"I'm often cold."

"I'm usually the opposite. Tend to run hot," Will said, giving him a wry grin.

Hannibal returned his smile, but his had more teeth. "I have noticed." He came nearer to Will, fingertips ghosting over his coat. "This color suits you."

"It's from the village," Will said.

Hannibal seemed a little surprised. "I wasn't aware you visited there. I imagined you would find the amount of people overwhelming."

"It is, which is why I tend to avoid it. I'm sure you're there a lot, though. Part of your royal duties."

"My visits are an important part of ensuring my people are well, as you can relate." Hannibal's strong hands wrapped around his waist. "There is also the occasional house call."

"Doesn't the village have a doctor?"

"I was thinking about finding a replacement. The current doctor Chilton is an idiot."

Will barked a laugh. "Is that why they asked for you during a snowstorm?"

"It was. Tobias Budge's niece had been injured."

Will frowned hearing the name. "The musician? From tonight?"

Hannibal nodded. "He came asking for me directly after the incident."

There was something building in the back of Will's mind, the shape indistinct but wriggling like a stubborn river trout, the scales the only part he could see as they flashed silver in the cloudy water.

He was distracted by Hannibal holding him close, hands pressed into his lower back. He dipped his head to Will's neck and inhaled, breath tickling as Hannibal pressed kisses down to his collarbone, tugging aside his shirt. "I have missed you, Will."

Will met his fervent gaze from under his lashes. "It's only been a week or so." Hannibal watched his mouth as he spoke.

"Much too long." Hannibal bore him down onto the fur covered bed, drawing them together, chest to hip. Will could feel Hannibal's powerful, even heartbeat that was so different from his that fluttered fast.

Will brought their lips together. Hannibal tasted of the wine they'd shared in the library and a bright note that was all his own. He pushed his tongue into the taste, meeting muscle that coiled around his, slippery and alive. Will spread his legs, letting Hannibal rub down between them, the heated line of his body like a brand. Will ran a hand up his spine, wanting them closer so Hannibal was the only thing he could feel, the only thing he could taste.

Hannibal pulled back and sat up, breathing hard. He reached to undo his buttons and ties, both of them pushing away at their clothes until they were bared to each other.

Will ran his hands over Hannibal's chest, splaying his fingers in the hair there. He pulled him closer until Hannibal's cock lay hard and ruddy against his hip. It twitched under his gaze and pulsed when Will gripped him. He thumbed at the sticky head and Hannibal rocked into his fist, moaning low and long.

Will bucked up at the sound, cock slapping against his stomach. Hannibal clutched his hip to steady him and took both of their cocks in his hand, Will's hand caught between them. They worked each other like that -- it chafed a little but Will thought it was perfect.

"Do you have something we can use?" he murmured.

Hannibal didn't answer him but reached for a box on the bedside table, fumbling around inside before taking out a vial of oil.

"Mm. Let me," Will said, sitting up. He nudged Hannibal down and took the bottle from him, moving to straddle his lap. "Do you still want to feel me? My magic?" he asked, needing to be certain.

"In all ways," Hannibal said, voice husky with emotion.

Will opened the vial. The oil was cool in his hand and warmed as he spread it over his fingers, reaching back to brush two coated fingers over his hole.

Hannibal licked his lips, cataloguing the expressions on Will's face as he pushed a finger into himself. His soft mouth parted and his cheeks darkened, the flush spreading down his neck and chest. Hannibal wanted to touch him badly but didn't want to disturb the vision he made. It was torturous.

Will's eyes were half-lidded and glassy as he pressed another finger in, panting slightly. Hannibal groaned and Will's eyes flickered, a shadow passing over them, like a cloud across a blue sky. The blue was more vivid than Hannibal had ever seen it and seemed to glow in the dimming firelight. The spicy fragrance was back in the air, and the taste of rain with it.

Hannibal touched Will's hip and the haze in his eyes cleared somewhat. Will smiled at him and leaned down to kiss him. Hannibal dug hands into his hair, crushing curls in his fingers, and deepened the kiss. He tugged Will’s lower lip between his teeth, sucking on it until it was swollen. He was rougher than he meant to be and the lip started bleeding, the flavor of Will's blood quickly filling his mouth like a heady sweet wine.

Will moaned, breaking away. He stared down at Hannibal, looking a little alarmed. His blood was smeared across his mouth.

"Let me have you, Will," he said, fiercely. He brought a thumb up to Will’s lips, rubbing in the blood and spit there until they glistened.

"You can--" Will breathed. He blinked, eyes flicking back and forth between Hannibal's. "You can-- You do already."

Hannibal grabbed him close and rolled them until he had Will's face between his hands below him. He kissed him, and kissed him, and reached around until he found the vial of oil.

He coated his fingers and pressed them to Will's hole, finding him relaxed and open. He sunk two into him and Will's breath rushed out, groaning when Hannibal curved his fingers, seeking the place that would bring Will greater pleasure. Will squirmed, panting hard and clenching.

"Hannibal," he moaned.

Hannibal pulled back to slick his cock and began to push slowly into Will, who closed his eyes and arched his back at the pressure, hands grasping Hannibal’s shoulders to draw him

closer so he covered Will completely. Will felt feverishly hot and the air was filled with the strong smell of rain, of ozone and wet earth, and that strange spice Hannibal couldn't place but was intoxicating mixed with the lingering tang of Will's blood on his tongue.

When he began to move, Will clutched him hard, meeting his thrusts. Hannibal couldn't look anywhere but his face, overcome and gasping with emotion. He opened his eyes and met Hannibal's, fixing him with a burning blue gaze, the glow now more pronounced and emanating into the room.

"Can you feel that?" Will whispered. He slid his hand from Hannibal's shoulder and stopped it over his heart. "Here." The hand moved to his stomach. "And here." His touch branded him like his gaze.

Hannibal's thrusts stuttered. Will suddenly raised himself to his elbows and pushed Hannibal onto his back. He hovered over him only a moment before he grasped his cock, aligning it and sinking down.

Will was everywhere now -- in the air, in his mouth, around his cock, filling his sight as he braced himself over him, fingers digging into Hannibal's chest -- the wet sounds of their bodies coming together almost savage. Hannibal felt unmoored as each sensation surrounded him, saturating him in the new and unfamiliar, the thrum of magic unsettling. His mind was adrift.

Will panted above him -- motions becoming erratic. "Here," he gasped. "Stay here with me, Hannibal."

Hannibal grabbed Will's hips, bruising, and thrust up into him hard. Will sobbed as he came, pulsing warmth across Hannibal's stomach. Hannibal surged up so Will was in his lap, his upward thrusts forceful, breath harsh against Will's neck as he rutted blindly. Will keened when he felt Hannibal fill him, arms tight around him, and felt his cock spasm deep within.

They were entwined, holding onto each other and trying to catch their breath. Will's forehead rested against Hannibal's shoulder, sweat making the curls against his nape stick out in all directions. Hannibal stroked through them with fingers that trembled.

He could feel Will's heartbeat beating in time with his own, and it was wondrous and terrible.

***

Will awoke to sunlight streaming into the bedroom golden and red, the sky stained crimson.

The room was cold, the fire burning out in the early hours of the morning and not yet relit. Will was warm though, tucked under slightly too many layers of fur. Hannibal had left when Will was still asleep, remembering waking only momentarily when he kissed Will's hair, murmuring about needing to meet with someone.

Will stretched, yawning, and scrubbed a hand across his face. Sitting up, he saw something shimmer in the dawn light across the room on Hannibal's desk. He recognized it as Hannibal's signature -- the quicksilver traces he left from spellwork. Will got up, wrapping one of the fur blankets around him.

On the desk were many documents, most of them letters, but some looked like anatomical drawings that were likely from Hannibal's medical manuscripts. They were very skilled and Will flipped through them, feeling his face heat when he found a charcoal sketch of himself asleep before a fireplace, the one in his home under the oak tree, entirely nude.

Will stared at it until he caught the silvery shimmer again out of the corner of his eye. Under another stack of papers was a document, or two documents, and both of them had been taken from a spellbook. One was a finding spell that looked very much like the one Hannibal had described last night as they searched for it in his library. The other was a much darker spell -- a binding spell -- and written in familiar looping script was a note in the margin that just read *'lungs'*.

Will looked at the word for a long time. The shape under the water was growing clearer in his head and looked less and less like a simple trout. He dragged his eyes away when he noticed movement outside the window that had frosted overnight. A tiny figure was walking in the direction of the forest, leaving the castle grounds. The morning sunlight reflected off the tops of the trees dusted with snow and highlighted the figure's long auburn hair. When they glanced back, Will recognized the pale profile of the dryad, Abigail Hobbs.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your lovely kudos and comments! <3

Hope you're enjoying the mystery and things aren't too obvious! I should have the finale up in the next week or two. There's things to tie up and I'm still figuring out how ~~dramatic things should get~~ best to do so.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Beverly had been outside Will's door for ten minutes now.

"Will? Will. I know you're in there. Stop hiding and talk to me," she said.

She jiggled the door handle until Will made the metal knob too hot to touch and she yelled, cursing, and slapped a hand against the wood of the door. "This is so childish, Will. I haven't seen you in forever."

Will could hear her shuffling.

"What happened at the castle, Will? Did you get into a fight with Hannibal?" She paused. "You know he's been to the oak forest, right? I think he was looking for you." Her voice was muffled through the door.

Will had felt Hannibal's presence both times he visited. The first time Hannibal hadn't stayed long, but the second time he lingered around the trunk of each tree trying to determine which oak belonged to Will. He stopped for a long time at the base of one tree and Will wondered if he could sense him concealed below, thinking that if Hannibal had called for him then he would've shown himself. But Hannibal hadn't and after several hours of searching in vain, he'd left.

The memory reminded Will of the night of Hannibal's feast, of letting Hannibal in and sharing his magic, a fraction of the forest's energy spread between two aching bodies.

He glared at the fishing tie he was winding, almost pricking his finger on the sharp hook in his resentment.

"You can keep ignoring me," Beverly continued, sounding less exasperated and more strained, "But I wanted to let you know that Abigail is missing. Maybe missing. I don't want to freak you out, but her parents said she was gone this morning. They found a bloody cloth under her bed, so that could be--"

Beverly jumped back when Will yanked open the door.

"Easy there. Are you--" Beverly looked him over. "You look awful, Will." He had shadows under his eyes and had lost weight, appearing hollowed out and waxen. "Are you sick?" she asked, frowning. "You don't get sick."

"Why didn't you tell me about Abigail sooner?" he asked, a little hoarse like he hadn't spoken in days.

"I just found out." Beverly kept scrutinizing him, noticing the thick blanket he had bundled himself in. "Are you cold? You're never cold."

“Do you have the cloth her parents found?”

“Yeah.” She handed him the small scrap of crumpled linen; the blood stains were the color of rust. “What is this, Will? Is this Abigail’s blood? Do you know where she is?”

He didn’t, but he knew someone who might.

***

“--not, sir. I can't just let you in. And I doubt His Grace would want to meet with someone so...” The guard clearly wished to say something impolite, but instead said, “Aggressive. Especially without an appointment or invitation by the King."

“Hannibal knows me. I was here a few weeks ago. You took my invitation at the new year's feast, remember?” Will asked, aggressively.

“That's possible," the guard said, curtly. "Please address His Grace as His Grace or His Majesty,” he added, offended. “Since you do not have an invitation *today*, and I have no idea who you are, you will need to leave, or I will call for the other guards to remove you.”

Will was about to shove his way past before another voice spoke, “Mr. Zeller?”

The guard Zeller turned and bowed low, stepping aside as Hannibal approached. Hannibal's face was drawn and he looked tired, but his eyes brightened when they spotted Will.

“Will. This is unexpected.” He sounded relieved, stepping forward. Will stepped back and watched surprise then displeasure skitter across Hannibal’s face. “Won’t you come in?” he asked, after a barely perceptible pause, trying to hide his hurt in polite indifference. Will heard it anyway.

“No. I just wanted to speak with you. Outside is fine.” Will spun on his heel and made for the path that would lead him to the castle gardens. He heard Zeller sputter in protest at addressing Hannibal so rudely before Hannibal relieved him. Eventually, Will heard Hannibal following behind in even footsteps.

When they got to the gardens, Will chose to inspect the holly bush next to him rather than face Hannibal. The tiny red fruits were bold against dark green leaves. The shrub was the one of a few trees with foliage, everything else having died back in autumn and hibernating till warmer weather. The stone fountain in the middle was empty except for the statue of a crowned man, one of Hannibal’s ancestors that held a sword aloft, gaze stern.

“You have a gnome problem,” Will said, breaking the silence.

This was clearly not what Hannibal expected him to say and it was satisfying to hear his hesitation. “I beg your pardon?”

Will gestured to the yew hedges which were lopsided, the tops and sides looking like they had been gnawed off.

“They weren’t so happy about you destroying their knolls, so I guess that’s their retribution. I wouldn't be surprised if they planted some funny things in the ground, too. Spring should be a surprise.”

“I see,” said Hannibal after a moment. “I did not know there were gnomes living in the mounds.”

“No, you didn’t. Or maybe you did and didn’t care. I don’t know what you do and don’t know anymore," he said, trying and failing to temper his anger.

“Will--”

“What did you do to Abigail, Hannibal?” Will asked, cutting him off.

There was a pause before Hannibal asked, “Why have you been avoiding me, Will?”

Will wanted to shout in frustration. “No. No, that’s not how this is going to go. I ask a question and you answer it. So if I ask what happened to Abigail, you say--”

“That I do not know.”

“If you’re going to lie to me, Hannibal, I’d prefer lies of omission. You’re good at those. Don't just lie to my face.”

“I am not lying when I say I do not know where Abigail is.”

Will scoffed, flinging an arm out and accidentally hitting the holly, spraying snow everywhere and scraping his arm against the sharp leaves. “You’ve been lying to me since the beginning.”

“Look at me, Will.”

“If I look at you now I might hit you.”

“I am not the only one with secrets. What did you do with Randall Tier’s body?”

The question caught him so off guard that Will turned to stare at him. “Who?”

“My driver. You returned him to me, but it was merely a good imitation.”

They looked at one another silently. A bitter wind whipped through the courtyard, rustling the dead leaves on the ground.

“He died in the forest,” Will said slowly. “I couldn’t let the meat go to waste. Not when the sprites went to so much trouble to run your carriage off the road.”

“Would you have let them eat me?”

Will swallowed. “I considered it. It was foolish to take the forest road at night.”

“Did you serve Randall’s body to me at the gathering?” Hannibal asked, so unfazed that Will blinked at him several times.

“Yes,” he answered, softly. “But you knew that already. You knew when you tasted the meat."

“The meat wasn’t boar,” Hannibal said.

Will realized something then. “You’ve had human flesh before. Whose?”

Hannibal's face was expressionless. The black of his eyes should’ve been disturbing but Will was fascinated. “A story for another time I think," Hannibal said. "I smell smoke.”

Will looked towards the forest where a thin column of grey-blue smoke rose into the sky. It looked like a campfire but the color made him uneasy.

“What is that?” he asked.

“I believe it’s Abigail.” Hannibal’s face was grim. “She's begun the spell without me.”

***

Abigail closed the circle on the ground with a swoop of her finger, ash clinging to her skin. She perched on the flat boulder that was used as a bench, one of a ring of stones that overlooked the lake.

In her hands she held an ear to be sacrificed in the spell she worked.

It was the ear of one of Hannibal’s servants. Hannibal explained he had been killed by the same person that killed Marissa, and Abigail was going to make sure no one else died.

She lit a match and threw it onto the circle, blue flames sparking and catching, and placed the ear in the middle of the fire. She stood back, gazing at the crackling flames and waited.

“Abigail!”

Abigail saw Will emerge from the treeline, hurrying towards her, Hannibal close behind him like a shadow.

“Stop,” she said, and Will came to a halt.

“Abigail. What are you doing?” Will asked.

She ignored him and looked at Hannibal. “Did you bring her lungs?” she asked.

Hannibal sighed. “This was not what we discussed, Abigail.”

She glanced once at Will. “Why is he here?”

“What is that?” Will asked, spotting the flesh in the flaming circle. “What lungs? How do you know each other?” He turned to Hannibal who looked back at him, face betraying nothing.

“Marissa’s lungs,” Abigail answered. Will’s eyes were locked on Hannibal.

“It *was* you,” Will said.

“Yes, and no, it’s not what you think.” Abigail said, speaking rapidly, “I wasn't lying when I said I didn’t see any creatures that night. I saw him, the human king. He was taking Marissa’s lungs. He said they were for a spell. That he didn’t kill Marissa but could help me kill who did. I kept his secret, and he’s been helping me.”

Will tore his gaze from Hannibal and shook his head. “Helping you how, Abigail?”

“Hunt Marissa’s killer,” she said impatiently, like it should've been obvious. Her eyes focused on something past Will. “Him.”

Tobias Budge stepped into the clearing.

***

Will thought he was losing his mind.

"Good afternoon, Tobias," Hannibal said, sounding like he had gathered everyone together for a picnic in the woods and the final guest had arrived.

"Your Grace." Tobias' eyes flitted between the three of them, lingering on Will before landing on Abigail. "I see you brought the girl."

Hannibal tilted his head. "She brought herself."

"Hannibal. What's going on?" he asked, feeling dread slide like a handful of snow down his back.

"I was hoping to surprise you, Will. You wanted to know about the magic weakening your forest."

"That's not-- That doesn't make any sense." He frowned at Tobias, who eyed him placidly.

"I wasn’t expecting you to be here. His Grace said it would only be the girl and to come when the fire started.”

“Abigail?” Will asked, trying to make sense of everything. “What’s she to you?”

“She’s the last part of the spell. I needed two hearts. I have Franklyn’s, but not hers, and His Grace said I couldn’t have yours, even though it would’ve been preferable.”

Tobias reached into the lumpy bag he was carrying and Will expected a bloody heart but instead he withdrew a woven wooden ring. Will recognized it as his missing crown from the solstice and a creeping sensation of understanding came over him, mixed with acrid fear. He felt like a beetle exposed to sunlight, wanting to scuttle back into moist soil.

“How did you get that?” Will whispered.

“That’s a question with an interesting answer. An answer that starts with Franklyn.”

Tobias grasped the crown, turning it around and around. Will was riveted as it passed through his hands.

“You could say it was fate. I met Franklyn the night my niece was injured. I was told to remain in the castle, out of concern for the storm and my safety. Franklyn told me he admired my music ability and magic skill. He said the King was intrigued by magic and had a library full of spellbooks. Of course I'd heard of the royal collection and asked to see them. Franklyn was so eager to show me."

Tobias' hands stopped, and he studied the crown in his hands.

"That's where I learned of the beast," he said. "Imagine my surprise that the rumor of a powerful creature living in the forest was actually true. There were records of people seeing it. There were also ideas for trapping it, for containing it and perhaps tapping into its magic.

“I asked Franklyn to help me. I said I planned to gift the beast to the King, so of course he agreed. When I met with him to return the book I’d borrowed, he mentioned that the King would be gone the night of the solstice, that he had been visiting the forest for long stretches of time and had met someone there. Naturally I was curious, so I followed you.”

Tobias looked at Hannibal, whose face was as untroubled as the lake behind them. The creature in its depths waited, watching.

“Down a long and winding tunnel deep under the earth. To the most remarkable place I had ever seen. My spell required the ‘eye of the forest’-- something I’d been struggling to decipher. How *does* one represent such a thing? And then I saw you.” Tobias’ eyes flicked over Will. “The fae king under the hill, and I knew. I just needed something of yours, and then I found this.” He held up Will’s crown.

“Marissa saw you that night,” Will said, face pale. “You couldn’t let her live.”

“I couldn’t let her ruin everything,” Tobias corrected.

Abigail, who had been standing off to the side, shrieked in outrage and lunged for Tobias. Will made a grab for her but she slipped out of his reach. Tobias was shocked for only a moment before he produced a thin, metallic wire from his bag; Will realized it was an instrument string.

Tobias swung the string out in an arc, wrapping it around Abigail's arm and pulling to dig in, making her cry out in pain. Hannibal took a step forward but stopped when Tobias yanked the string harder and Abigail yelped sharply.

"Hannibal!" Will rushed at Tobias, intending to tackle him around the waist. "Get the crown!"

As if anticipating Will's actions, Tobias lobbed the crown over them and Will watched in horror as it landed onto the circle of fire. The binding spell Abigail had started met with whatever terrible spell Tobias had worked into the crown and there was a blast of blinding light. It knocked them all to the ground in a wave of heat and abruptly lit the nearest trees on fire, spreading blue flames wickedly fast.

Will yelled, clutching his stomach, and feeling like he had been stabbed. He heard Hannibal shout his name, but his eyes were slammed shut in agony and he couldn't see, could only feel the heat of the flames surrounding them and the scuffle above him as Hannibal fought to free Abigail from Tobias.

He felt so weak, exhaustion and pain lancing through him made worse by the force of the spells that had backfired; the weight of sickness that had pervaded through the forest all year coming to a head. He could feel Tobias' magic warring with Hannibal's charged white with rage, further upsetting the balance in the woods as their signatures converged with Will's own wild magic. It took his breath away and he gagged, retching up bile and soot.

He pressed his hands into the ground, crouching down and feeling his heartbeat slow. There was a pounding in Will's head that rattled his bones, his heart and gut, and thumped, again and again, beating like a giant muscle. The rumble grew stronger until it roared and enclosed him in a warmth that might've been from the fire raging around them but also seemed to radiate from within. He heard a loud crack and then there was nothing but darkness.

***

Hannibal awoke to the sound of crunching, like someone stomping on packed snow.

After Abigail had succeeded in twisting the metal string around Tobias' wrists, effectively restraining him, Hannibal had wasted no time snapping his neck, instantly severing the connection between his spell and Abigail's in another rush of fire and knocking him out with its strength.

The forest still burned but the flames were a normal orange glow that licked into a purple twilight sky and reflected off the lake and into the glade.

Hannibal heard another wet crunch.

In the dark of the trees crouched a demon, skin as black as night and glistening in the light of the blazing forest. The antlers on its head pierced the air with each bob of its head as it ripped great chunks of meat from the remains of Tobias Budge, snapping through bones and sinew in jaws of pointed teeth.

It was the monstrous heart of the forest and it had come to feed.

Hannibal hurried to his feet and the creature looked up, jaws clacking together around a mouthful like the thwack of an axe hitting wood. The creature's face was all shadow and its antlers seemed to expand, long and sharp as its claws. Hannibal smelled wet earth combined with fresh blood and charred wood and underneath it all, Will's scent-- spice and rain.

Because it was Will staring at him, mouth messy with blood.

Because it had always been Will.

Will was the monster that lived in the forest, and Hannibal watched the shade of the beast fade away until it was only Will that looked up at him with sorrowful blue eyes. Hannibal felt as though they were the last creatures alive in the forest.

"Where's Abigail?" he asked.

"I told her to go help the others. The fire reached the oak forest."

Hannibal nodded. He realized Will wasn't angry with him, only sad.

"You've always known, haven't you," Will said, quietly. "About me."

Hannibal smiled. "I hoped you would reveal yourself to me eventually. I thought you almost would that night in the library when you tested to see how much I knew."

"Was Tobias a test?"

"I think I was curious to see what you would do when confronted with him."

"You promised him Abigail. In exchange for what?"

"He desired to be my Royal Magician and wanted to prove his worth by capturing the beast."

"It was all a bluff. You just moved the pieces around until you got what you wanted."

"I never wanted this," Hannibal said, looking at the forest ablaze.

Will said nothing and stood, wiping an arm across his mouth. Hannibal went to him, wanting to touch him but unsure it was welcome.

"When you disappeared for weeks, I was concerned Tobias had hurt you before I could warn you what he was after. I intended to tell you that morning you left, but I returned to an empty room, an empty bed. Did you harm yourself climbing out the window in your haste to get away from me?"

“I was fine.”

“It was a considerable jump.”

“You know I *can* do magic.” The twist of Will’s lips was wry but he didn’t meet Hannibal’s gaze. “You should go,” he said, rubbing at eyes watery from the smoke. Hannibal thought they might’ve been tears.

He took Hannibal’s hand, palm warm and fingernails crusted with blood, and dropped a small acorn into it. Hannibal recognized it as one of Will’s traveling acorns. Will squeezed his hand before letting go and stepping back. Hannibal had to stop himself from grabbing him and insisting he return with him to the castle.

Will turned, almost as if he’d heard Hannibal’s thoughts, looking torn.

“Why am I painted all over your castle, Hannibal? Some of those murals are new.”

Hannibal watched the ash fall around them like snow before he answered. “My ancestors have always been captivated by the stories of the forest.” He hesitated, catching ash in his hand. “You are correct the frescoes are more recent, and the truth is because you saved my life. Once as a foolish boy and again as a foolish man.”

Will wavered a moment before he nodded once and walked away, deeper into the forest, the smoky air swiftly swallowing his form.

***

It was the earliest spring in recent memory. Large swaths of the forest had burned away, leaving behind scorched trunks and limbs. Unseasonably warm air teased the trees and gradually, weeks after Tobias had been devoured in the woods, small shoots began appearing on all the branches. Grass poked through the ashy earth, thick and green, and crocuses and daffodils popped up around the bottom of the oaks.

The new shoots grew at such an alarming rate that the castle inhabitants and villagers suspected the work of demons, which was also their explanation for the mysterious fire that had ravaged the woods.

Hannibal had been intending on another visit with the remaining Budge family, still grieving and unable to explain why Tobias had chosen to enter the forest when it was on fire. An attendant found Hannibal deep in thought in the gardens regarding the gnome-eaten bushes. He was handed a small leather pouch and told that a woman with long dark hair had delivered it.

Inside Hannibal found an acorn, this one a toasted brown and containing a shine like it had been lacquered, the blue shimmering in the sunlight. There was a note tucked with it that read in small print--

I forgive you.

***

Hannibal looked around the oak forest before pushing the acorn into the dirt.

Instantly an oak appeared, as wide and impressive as any Hannibal had ever seen. A door had been carved into the trunk, golden handle gleaming, and as Hannibal looked, the door opened inwards. He stepped through.

Chapter End Notes

That’s all folks! Thanks for reading and hope you were entertained by this little story - I certainly had fun writing it and learned a lot!

This work was unbetaed (sorry for any wacky grammar) ;D

I'm plotting out another AU since that's my jam apparently, so hope see you next time! <3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!